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Israel Asks Reasons for U.S. Probe

Customs Raids Prompt Criticism

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JERUSALEM, Dec. 15—Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin told Israel's Cabinet today that he has asked U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering for an explanation of surprise raids last week by U.S. Customs agents, accompanied by a television crew, on three U.S. factories in a probe of Israel's acquisition of weapons technology.

Cabinet Secretary Yossi Beilin quoted Rabin as telling the ministers in the closed session that "Israel acted legally and openly, and the entanglement of Israel's name in this affair is cause for astonishment."

There were growing expressions of suspicion among some senior Israeli officials today that factions in the Reagan administration hostile to Israel have embarked on a campaign of harassment against Israel as retribution for the Jonathan Jay Pollard espionage case.

The U.S. Customs investigation into the possible illegal transfer of weapons technology to Israel and new U.S. limitations on the transfer of intelligence to the Israeli government, some Israeli officials said, appear to form a pattern that could go beyond an attempt merely to apply pressure on Israel to cooperate more fully in the investigation of Pollard.

The officials, who spoke on the condition that they not be identified because of the sensitive nature of the subject, suggested that both steps may have been encouraged by what they called pro-Arab elements in the Reagan administration in an effort to upset efforts by Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres to put an end to the espionage controversy and resume the special

relationship between the two countries.

One senior official said, "We know where these elements are. They come and go with each new administration. Some are in the State Department, and some are in other departments. But their common objective is to change the special relationship between Israel and the United States."

There were also suggestions by some of the officials that the FBI and other U.S. intelligence agencies, stung by the recent spate of espionage disclosures in Washington, are seeking to make Israel a scapegoat to regain lost prestige.

The raid on three U.S. factories Thursday was described by these officials as part of the effort to "punish" Israel for allegedly recruiting Pollard, 31, a U.S. Navy civilian intelligence analyst who is charged with selling top-secret documents to contacts in the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

The Cabinet took no formal action on either the U.S. Customs probe or the new restraints on intelligence-sharing. But of the Customs raids, Beilin said after the meeting, "It is not a very good feeling to hear something like this, which has no basis."

Israel maintains that it complied with all U.S. regulations when it sought to import technology for the chromium electroplating of 120-mm tank cannon barrels, and the State Department on Friday issued a statement saying that "no Israeli officials or agencies have been implicated at this time."

A senior Cabinet source said that the Israeli government was "embarrassed and angry" over the incident.

A team of State and Justice department investigators has been in Israel since Thursday collecting evidence and interviewing Israeli officials implicated in the Pollard case. They returned to Tel Aviv again today to question Israeli witnesses but continued to refuse to talk with reporters. An Israeli source close to the investigation, however, said that the U.S. team's talks had "proceeded well and with good cooperation."

The senior Cabinet source, asked whether he thought the U.S. limitations on intelligence transfer to Israel were linked to the Pollard

probe, replied, "Since we don't know what is behind it, I can't rule that out."

A senior Foreign Ministry official said earlier in the week that he expected some curtailment of intelligence-sharing until the completion of the Pollard probe. But he said he thought the reduction would affect only informal exchanges between intelligence agencies of the two countries and would not be made formal with a public announcement.

Another Foreign Ministry official, who also asked not to be identified, expressed bafflement over the Customs raids, saying, "I do not understand why somebody made such an accusation. It is a very sensitive time now."

In the raids Thursday, Customs agents seized records from three U.S. companies supplying Israel with technology that uses chrome electroplating to improve tank cannons. Affidavits filed by Customs said the companies had not obtained required export permits but Israel has said it had U.S. approval.

The Foreign Ministry official said he hoped the weapons technology transfer controversy would not affect what he called "the new spirit of cooperation" surrounding the Pollard case. But he said, "It will strengthen the hand of those in Israel who are saying we should not have cooperated at all. There are people who believe" Israeli cooperation in the Pollard case "was a mistake. Those people are now saying, 'I told you so.'"

The official added, "It would seem to be a major American interest to keep things quiet and under control while investigating this case in order to keep alive the full cooperation of Israel."

Israeli military analysts also characterized the curtailment of intelligence-sharing as a form of punishment stemming from the Pollard case.

Zeev Schiff, military commentator for the independent Hebrew daily Haaretz, whose views frequently reflect those of top Defense Ministry officials, today said, "The reduction in the exchange of information goes a good deal further than regular pressure. There is in this a form of punishment of an ally by U.S. executive echelons."

Schiff added, "Israel is receiving more and more reports that elements hostile to Israel in the [U.S.] administration are seeking to carry out retribution against Israel for the Pollard affair."

He said the U.S. Customs allegations show that "clearly, elements hostile to Israel in the United States have been encouraged by the Pollard affair and are exploiting the situation for attacks against Israel and to undermine relations between the two countries."
